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ABSTRACT

Findings from a study of administrators' perceptions of student dropout causes and possible interventions are presented in this paper. Current dropout literature was categorized into four sources of student withdrawal from school--schools, parents, peers, and students. A national survey of 650 secondary principals and 650 superintendents produced 891 responses, a 68.5 percent response rate. Results show that "criminal/victimization" causes, which include substance and child abuse, crime involvement, and illiteracy, received the highest composite level of agreement. Respondents assigned most importance to those causes that reside within students, those least controllable by administrators. The national priority set forth appeared to be one of blaming the victims. That administrators ranked school-related factors over which they had the greatest control as less important raises the question that they may be distancing themselves from the problem. Two tables are included. (30 references) (LMI)

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SCHOOL DROPOUTS:

What agenda do administrators see for dealing with the problem?

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Abstract

At a time when more and more jobs call for a high school diploma, students are not finishing high school at an alarming rate. The current literature cites multiple reasons for students dropping out of school, but all reasons can be categorized into four source groups thought to carry the blame for this problem singly or in combination: schools, parents, peers and the students themselves.

This study was designed, in part, to determine where the problems lie and where we might intervene without the necessity of additional research. Administrators were chosen as the focus for the study because their perceptions are likely to control the decisions made about intervention programs and the allocation of funds to intervention projects in the public schools.

Findings indicate that administrators know what causes students to drop out of school. They agree that certain causes of dropping out should be national priorities. They do not agree about the sufficiency of the data base on these priority items, however.

SCHOOL DROPOUTS:

What agenda do administrators see for dealing with the problem?

Nationally, we have a problem in education: students are dropping out of school. We also know that dropouts leave school for a variety of reasons. Some leave school in a desperate attempt to avoid failure. Others are escaping from a place "they see as cruel, tedious, irrelevant, boring and uncaring" (Grossnickle, 1986, p. 11). Clark (1988) asserts that "at-risk youth are consciously or unconsciously perceived and treated as if they were expendable" (p.ii). They are victims of discrimination and they learn that they will be ignored, rejected and neglected. Whatever students' reasons are for dropping out of school, public education must examine this problem, the variables related to its solution and ultimately implement strategies which will help solve the problem.

In school districts nationally, those individuals in the position to making decisions about the selection and implementation of strategies designed to keep children in school are administrators, building level principals and district superintendents. What do these public school administrators, the individuals who deal with this problem daily, believe are the primary factors associated with solving this problem? In what areas do we already know enough to make a difference? Is there consensus on an agenda for resolution of this problem? Answers to these questions will establish a clearer agenda for both intervention and research.

Critical Perspective

The research literature indicates that the dropout is not one kind of student. According to Morrow (1987), dropouts should be variously labeled:

* Pushouts - students who the school actively wants to be rid of because they are viewed as undesirable (typically aggressive,

disturbed or confrontive students);

* Disaffiliateds - students who have not bonded with schools and who no longer desire to be affiliated with schools (frequently poor, unmotivated, socially unwanted students);
* Educational mortalities - students who fail to complete academic programs and may not be capable of learning even if more time were given to them (slow learners or those in special education);
* Capable dropouts - students who could academically matriculate but their personal socialization conflicts with school rules and policy (typically middle class or above, majority students); and
* Stopouts - students who withdraw and then return, usually within the same year (usually females, sometimes gifted who go to college early).

Conventional wisdom would lead to the assumption that each of these different types of dropouts are likely to withdraw from school for different reasons. The research literature reflects four general categories of variables identified as causes given for students dropping out of school: school, home, peers and the students themselves. They form the critical perspective of this study.

School causes. A number of reasons have been offered by various writers about how schools may contribute to the dropout problem, however the findings of these studies conflict and they examine different sets of factors affecting dropping out of school (Bishop, 1988; Ligon, 1988; Widmann & Hoisden, 1988; Weber & Sechler, 1988). Also, schools participating in the studies have different populations that react differently to various school pressures.

But, generally, schools cause students to dropout intentionally (pushouts) and unintentionally (disaffiliateds). Comerford and Jacobson

(1987) cite conflicts between students and the school or with individuals within the school, such as teachers and administrators, as factors in dropping out. Conflict in school many times centers around academic performance.

A lack of earned credits has been shown to be a factor in dropping out as well (Tidwell, 1985). Widmann and Hoisden (1988) assert that students who have little hope of graduating because they have been retained one or more years or because they have failed too many classes are also likely dropout candidates.

Inability to adequately function can lead to school leaving behavior (truancy or running away). In turn, this can lead to expulsion, to academic failure, and to the inability to earn credits because of too many absences. Raffe (1986) talks of truancy as an indicator of lack of school persistence. In the extreme, running away has the same effect.

Home causes. School persistence is also affected by the home or family situation in which individuals are embedded. Children whose families do not have strong backgrounds in education and who do not support the educational process are more likely to drop out (Tidwell, 1985; Barr & Knowles, 1986; Polit & Kahn, 1987; Coleman, 1988). This is compounded when the community provides the same weak or nonexistent level of support for academic learning. Those students who do not have active parental involvement in their education or who do not have parental contact, such as children placed in foster homes, are likely to drop out. This is particularly true for minority students (Schwaback, 1985).

As families become more disengaged and less functional, the dropout rate increases (Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands, 1987). Intrafamilial problems, sexual and physical abuse, parental disorders such as alcoholism and cultural differences (Ediger, 1987)

all lead to deemphasis of education and increases in dropout behavior. Generally, students who have poor family relations are more at-risk than those who do not (O'Connor, 1985).

Another family related variable deals with home or economic responsibilities (Tidwell, 1985). Students may be responsible for younger siblings or for part of a family business and not be able to attend enough school to graduate. These students are likely dropouts. Many dropouts report a need to make money and help out at home as a reason for leaving school (Hartford Public Schools, 1987). This seems to be particularly true when keeping a job is predicated on not being in school (Raffe, 1986).

Peer causes. A different body of research examines peer variables associated with the dropout. These factors relate to things that peers may do, model for the dropout, or inveigle others into doing, all of which may directly cause dropping out or may lead to conflicts which subsequently cause the student to drop out (Dunham & Alpert, 1987; Irvine, 1987; Perales, 1988).

Peers can influence students to leave school by being out of school themselves, oftentimes with attractive alternatives like cars and money that students who are in school do not have. This seems to be particularly true when both the students and the peers are delinquents (Dunham & Alpert, 1987). These "system failure" peers show no affiliation to school and draw those still in the educational system directly away from it through enticement and indirectly through modeling. Peers may also model cultural mores which are antithetical to school persistence.

Another factor that seems to be particularly related to urban schools is peer violence. Peer violence keeps many children away from schools and can cause them to drop out if they are severely threatened. This seems to be exaggerated in situations where there is gang "turf" or territorial problems

associated with the school (Perales, 1988).

Student causes. Intrapersonal variables are also influential in the persistence of students in high school (Barr & Knowles, 1986; Hartford Public Schools, 1987; Mensch & Kandel, 1988). Many students who drop out of school report that school is boring and a waste of their time (Barr & Knowles, 1986; Hartford Public Schools, 1987). Others who drop out report frustration with learning the academic content (Barr & Knowles, 1986) or low grades (Comerford & Jacobson, 1987). Many of these students are functionally illiterate in reading and mathematics (Bernick, 1986) leading to alienation from the school process (O'Connor, 1985). The problem with academics is compounded when the students perceive that they are viewed as members of a "lower class" by their teachers (O'Connor, 1985).

For young women pregnancy is the most frequently cited cause of dropping out of school (Ediger, 1987; Hartford Public Schools, 1987). When pregnant, dropping out can also occur as a consequence for school policy, because of family pressure or because of embarrassment. After a child is born, school rules and the availability of support systems for child care influence student school persistence.

Another significant variable relates to habitual substance abuse, whether alcohol or drugs. Mensch and Kandel (1988) report that a majority of drug users drop out, even when controlling for other variables. This is also supported by Ediger (1987) and Smith (1986).

Members of minority cultural groups (and probably other students) react to low reading ability and to ranking below average in their classes by dropping out (Schultz, Toles, Rice, Brauer & Harvey, 1986). Additionally, developmentally disabled students who become delinquent are increasingly at-risk of dropping out (McMahan, 1986).

Objectives

A wealth of research is available and a wide range of dropout factors have been identified, but, to date, no persistent strategies have been identified and implemented as solutions of this educational epidemic. Could it be that information exists but has not been received or processed by those who are in the position of making decisions which will affect the solution of this problem? Educational practitioners make school decisions. Principals and superintendents make decisions on the basis of what they know. This research identifies their knowing.

The purpose of this study was to survey public school principals and school district superintendents about the dropout issue. Specifically, answers to two questions were sought:

* What contributory at-risk factors should be national priorities items?
* Of the at-risk factors identified, which are perceived to already have a research base that would will enable educators to build effective intervention programs?

Method

Instrumentation

A literature search of ERIC produced 853 recent papers or articles on "at-risk/dropouts." Each article's abstract was reviewed and 461 articles were read. From these readings, a representational list of causes of dropping out of school were developed for the survey (Bull, Salyer & Montgomery, 1990). The instrument contained 42 items identified by the literature as a possible cause for dropping out, withdrawing, being removed from or leaving school early. Two 5-point Likert-like responses were requested for each item ranging form "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The first response indicated

whether the item should be a national priority; the second indicated whether respondents thought a sufficient research base existed to develop an effective intervention program if funding were available.

Sample

The population for this study was all secondary principals and superintendent of independent school districts nationally. A sample of respondents were randomly selected from Patterson's American Education (Moody, 1989) by administrative level (secondary principals N=650, superintendents N=650) for each state and the District of Columbia. A total of 891 usable surveys were returned for a 68.5% response rate.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using SYSTAT (Wilkinson, 1987) and SPSS-X (1983) with default options, unless otherwise indicated. Principal components analysis with a varimax rotation was conducted on both sets of responses. Individual items and the resulting factors were subjected to Chi-square analyses. The "agree" and "strongly agree" and "disagree" and "strongly disagree" categories were collapsed for ease of presentation and analysis. Expected values were 40% agree, 20% undecided and 40% disagree.

Results

Subjects

The sample contained 752 males and 119 females. They averaged 10.7 years of experience in administration and 12.3 years in teaching. In terms of education, 417 held BA/BS degrees, 191 held MA/MS/MAT degrees and 245 held Specialist or Ph.D./Ed.D. degrees. In terms of socio-economic status, the schools were reportedly 19 upper class, 583 middle class and 121 lower class. (Not all categories add up to 891 due to missing data.)

Causes of Dropping Out Factors

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From the 42 items, nine factors were identified in response to the question "What contributory at-risk factors should be national priorities items?" The nine factors were:

Factor 1: Multicultural causes,

Factor 2: Home problems,

Factor 3: Structural (school) conflict,

Factor 4: Lack of educational support,

Factor 5: Child rearing issues,

Factor 6: Inappropriate educational programming,

Factor 7: Lack of peer group,

Factor 8: Criminal/victimization, and

Factor 9: Truancy.

All factor Chi-square analyses were found to be significant. Table 1 summarizes the factors, factor loadings, all related items, item loadings and Chi-square values.

Research Sufficiency Factors

Factor analysis of responses to the second question, "Which contributory at-risk factors are believed to already have a foundation of research from which to build effective intervention programs?," yielded seven factors:

Factor 1: Educationally dysfunctional,

Factor 2: Discrimination,

Factor 3: School conflict,

Factor 4: Response to inadequate education,

Factor 5: Being different from peer group,

Factor 6: Child related factors, and

Factor 7: Nontypical home lifestyle.

Chi-square analyses were significant. Table 2 reports these factors, factor loadings, all related items, item loadings and Chi-square values.

Item Examination

An examination of the items individually yielded eight national priority items for which there was 75% or more agreement:

* Dysfunctional/unstable family	90.2%
* Parental problems	88.8%
* Substance abuse	87.3%
* No hope of graduating	86.9%
* Truancy	83.2%
* Emotional problems	82.1%
* No parent support for education	79.3%
* Being alienated from school	76.8%

When the same 42 items were examined in terms of research sufficiency, none received 75% agreement. There was no consensus among respondents concerning the sufficiency of a data base for dropouts. All items are perceived as needing additional research.

Discussion

National Priorities

From the administrators in this study, nine clearly defined groups of national priorities emerged. The collection of causes titled criminal/ victimization received the highest composite level of agreement, with more than two-thirds of the respondents supporting it as a high national priority. Administrators in this study view this group of causes of dropping as the ones toward which the greatest effort should be made. Items making up this factor include substance abuse, child abuse, involvement in crime and illiteracy.

Factors that received support from more than 40% of the respondents

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included home problems, structural conflict, lack of educational support, inappropriate educational programming and truancy. Individual items from these factors include parental problems, no hope of graduating, no parental support for education, pregnancy, frustration and boredom. It should be noted, however, that there is also a great deal of uncertainty involved with these factors. In some cases, more than one-third of the respondents had composite scores which indicated that they were undecided in their views on these causes of dropping out.

Factors receiving low levels of support were multicultural issues and lack of a peer group. Respondents in this study believed other factors were of greater importance than these as national priority items.

When examined in terms of reported priorities, the data lead to an interesting interpretation. Administrators view as most important national priorities those factors which reside within the students. These are followed by parental and environmental priorities as well as structural/educational priorities, only the last of which could be said to be directly under the control of the administrator in a school. The lowest level priorities, multicultural and peer group access, both of which are amenable to administrative manipulation, are not believed to be high priority items.

A variety of conclusions can be drawn. The first is that administrators nationally focus concern on broader societal issues knowing that they themselves are tending to the causes of dropping out found in their own schools and districts. A second conclusion to be drawn from these data is that school and peer related problems must be recognized and addressed in public education if the full range of causes of dropping are to be examined and taken into consideration. If this is not done, it is possible that administrators will continue to blame the victim, not schools, and continue to

live with high dropout rates.

The national priority agenda set forth here appears to be one that includes fixing the homes of students and fixing the children. These administrators appear to believe that this should help alleviate the dropout problem. Although this agenda does not support reformation of the schools, it is one which seems to have widespread administrative support.

Research Base

There are seven groupings of causes which administrators believe could be dealt with effectively, at one level or another, given sufficient funds and resources. The factor titled Inadequate Education, composed of the two items boredom and frustration, could be cured if resources were allocated. Fully one-half of the respondents (60%) believe that these two problems could be dealt with without further research, even though these problems were not previously targeted as high priorities.

Administrators are less sure that other groups of causes could be remedied if resources were allocated. However, at least one-third of the respondents believe that the following factors could be dealt with without further research: being educationally dysfunctional, discrimination, school conflict, being different from peer group, child related factors, and nontypical home lifestyle.

Somewhat surprisingly, all factors garnered at least a one-third agreement rate. There are strong implications from these data that at least one-third of the administrators nationally believe that most of the major causes of dropping out can be corrected without further research. The only item that received less than one-third agreement from respondents was dropping out to escape from a foster home. For the administrators in this study, this problem needs further research.

We believe the most interesting finding from factor analyses is the apparent uncertainty of the administrators concerning the sufficiency of research. There was little disagreement with the factors but there is a high level of uncertainty in the responses.

Item Examination

At the item level, there appear to be indications of the beginning of a prioritized research agenda. Eight items garnered 75% agreement from the administrators responding. Since these items did not receive the same level of support when the sufficiency of research base question was asked, either more research is needed or enhanced dissemination of existing research must be provided.

Conclusions

Most worrisome are the indications in the data of the reverse "grass is greener" scenario. The administrators in this study appear to believe that the focus of dropout strategies should be on the children themselves and their home environments and problems. The ability of administrators to make real progress in helping students deal with these issues is noble, but questionable. The administrators in this study, however, do have the ability to make a different in their own schools and districts, yet their focus is not there. Could they be neglecting their own glass house and throwing stones at another?

Educators can not fail to see their own problems and attempt to remedy them. Dropouts are part of our future. We must nourish them and keep them, all of them, in school by making schools better and more comforting places to be.

This raises the question of whether administrators are distancing themselves from causes of dropping out or whether they individually or

collectively believe that they can deal with the school related causes. In the case where administrators believe they have some control over school related causes, they would have lowered the ratings of the items under school control. It is unclear with the current measure if the reason for lower ranks is because administrators perceive school related causes to be under control or if they are distancing themselves from the problem. It is interesting to note that the two factors over which the schools would have the greatest potential control, lack of a peer group and multicultural causes are the areas which garnered the least support.

The data do not provide clear direction for the implementation of effective intervention programs, but there is a clear consensus as to the issues public school administrators believe should be our national priority. If current research addresses these issues, the findings need to be communicated to administrators; if current research is lacking, these results indicate a national research agenda.

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Table 1

Causes of Dropping Out Factors* and Items

		A**	U	D	Total	X^2
Factor 1:	Multicultural Causes	182	418	251	851	457.9
Items:	Discrimination	145	149	555	849	
	Dehumanization	257	217	375	849	
	No teacher role model	285	168	395	848	
	Peer violence	181	145	517	843	
	No day care	416	168	266	850	
	Poverty	464	145	240	849	
Factor 2:	Home Problems	396	374	80	850	452.8
Items:	Living on one's own	538	166	144	848	
	Parental problems	755	37	58	850	
	Home responsibilities	534	142	168	844	
	Foster home	249	284	264	797	
	Runaway	422	180	188	790	
	Get away from home	487	125	238	850	
	Sports ineligible	364	128	355	847	
Factor 3:	Structural Conflict	461	291	104	856	290.9
Items:	Conflict with school	380	115	347	842	
	Conflict with teacher	441	99	301	841	
	Earn money	583	59	207	849	
	Get away from home	487	125	238	850	
	No hope of graduating	740	33	79	852	
Factor 4:	No Educational Support	497	259	102	858	283.0
Items:	No parental support	680	53	124	857	
	No peer support	556	115	180	851	
	No community support	275	71	501	847	

* All reported X^2's significant at $P < .000$).

** A = Agree; U = Undecided; D = Disagree; X^2 = Chi-square

Table 1 (continued)

Causes of Dropping Out Factors* and Items

			A**	U	D	Total	X^2
Factor 5:	Child Rearing		304	384	168	856	357.6
Items:	Spouse support		389	127	324	840	
	Pregnancy		555	69	225	849	
	No day care		416	168	266	850	
	Medical problems		132	141	580	853	
Factor 6:	Educational Programming		410	309	144	863	237.2
Items:	Frustration		555	70	167	792	
	Boredom		556	71	224	851	
	Undiagnosed learning disorders		356	92	398	846	
Factor 7:	Lack of Peer Group		122	390	337	849	425.0
Items:	Too different	213	202	432		847	
	No peer group	217	176	455		848	
	In special classes	278	203	369		850	
	Too old	132	141	580		853	
Factor 8:	Criminal/Victim	612	214	30		856	508.0
Items:	Substance abuse	741	50	58		849	
	Child abuse	627	146	83		856	
	Involved in crime	552	118	175		845	
	Illiterate	615	93	142		850	
	Migrant family	425	286	150		861	
	Dys/unstable family	772	51	32		855	
	Poverty	464	145	240		849	
Factor 9:	Truancy	446	340	69		855	416.6
Items:	Truant	712	37	107		856	
	No truant officer	422	87	339		848	
	Too old for peer group	366	124	359		849	
	Sports ineligible	364	128	355		847	
	No hope of graduating	740	33	79		852	

* All reported X^2's significant at $P < .000$).

** A = Agree; U = Undecided; D = Disagree; X^2 = Chi-square

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Table 2

Sufficiency of Data Base Factors* and Items

		A**	U	D	Total	X^2
Factor 1:	Educationally Dysfunctional	339	337	154	830	271.7
Items:	Dysfunctional family	386	213	229	828	
	No parental support	399	128	300	827	
	Child abuse	417	207	205	829	
	Substance abuse	518	87	227	832	
	Emotional problems	400	125	304	829	
	No peer support	375	182	263	820	
	Illiterate	384	170	274	828	
	No hope of graduating	522	89	223	834	
	Poverty	415	218	196	829	
	Involved in crime	386	227	216	829	
	No community support	354	182	287	823	
Factor 2:	Discrimination	337	378	123	838	398.5
Items:	Discrimination	356	224	245	825	
	Dehumanization	324	269	237	830	
	Peer violence	365	246	221	832	
	No teacher role model	386	227	216	829	
	Undiagnosed learning disorders	474	138	222	834	
	No truant officer	478	156	198	832	
	No day care	365	246	331	842	
Factor 3:	School Conflict	339	337	154	830	250.2
Items:	Conflict with school	398	181	248	827	
	Conflict with teacher	419	163	246	828	
	Earn money	442	159	229	830	
	Get away from home	353	213	262	828	
Factor 4:	Response To Inadequate Education	496	192	137	825	200.8
Items:	Boredom	491	125	219	835	
	Frustration	513	110	207	830	

* All reported X^2's significant at $P < .000$).

** A = Agree; U = Undecided; D = Disagree; X^2 = Chi-Square

Table 2 (continued)

Sufficiency of Data Base Factors* and Items

		A**	U	D	Total	X^2
Factor 5:	Being Different From Peer Group	355	361	124	840	357.2
Items:	Too different	332	285	218	835	
	No peer group	344	255	233	832	
	In special education	378	246	208	832	
	Too old	385	210	237	832	
Factor 6:	Child Related Factors	430	321	95	846	336.1
Items:	Support spouse	452	200	174	826	
	Pregnancy	580	107	145	832	
	Medical problems	361	257	210	828	
Factor 7:	Nontypical Home Life	330	394	118	842	444.5
Items:	Foster home	300	338	194	832	
	Runaway	370	250	213	833	
	Home responsibilities	385	219	224	828	
	Living on one's own	349	239	246	834	
	Sports ineligible	427	189	217	833	
	Fail competency test	381	229	216	826	

* All reported X^2's significant at $P < .000$).

** A = Agree; U = Undecided; D = Disagree; X^2 = Chi-Square